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Paducah shooter pleads guilty

Michael Carneal admitted to the Dec. 1 shooting that killed three students

By James Prichard
The Associated Press

PADUCAH, Ky. — A timid-looking teen-ager who opened fire on a high school prayer circle, killing three fellow students, pleaded guilty but mentally ill Monday and will have to spend at least 25 years in prison.

With his arms folded, Michael Adam Carneal acknowledged carrying out the attack last Dec. 1 at Heath High School in West Paducah.

Five other people were wounded in the rampage, one of a series of school shootings that rocked the nation during the last school year.

Defense attorney Chuck Granner said that Carneal believed that his classmates ridiculed him and that the shootings would bring him acceptance.

"Michael understands that his feelings, attitudes and beliefs at the time of the shootings were, in fact, wrong," the lawyer said. "He deeply regrets the overwhelming pain, the injuries and the loss of life that his acts have caused."

Judge Jeff Hines accepted the plea on the condition that Carneal get the maximum — life in prison without the possibility of parole for 25 years — at sentencing Dec. 16. The victims' families had originally opposed the plea because Carneal could have been eligible

for parole in as little as 12 years.

"He's definitely going to serve 25 years," prosecutor Tim Kaltbach said. "While today's events will not undo the horrible tragedy that affected and will continue to affect so many lives, we hope that in some measure it will begin to ease the pain."

Carneal will be held in a juvenile detention center until his 18th birthday, when he will be transferred to an adult prison. His mental health will be evaluated, and he could receive treatment.

His attorney characterized Carneal as paranoid, with a schizophrenia-like personality disorder, and said that with treatment, "we might have a chance of salvaging a young man."

A verdict of guilty to murder without the finding of mental illness carries a term of life with parole possible after 25 years. In Kentucky, a defendant must be at least 16 when the crime is committed to get the death penalty. Carneal was 14 at the time of the attack.

Granner read a statement on behalf of the boy's parents, John and Ann Carneal, that said the family was "determined to do the right thing" for everyone.

Deputies whisked Carneal, wearing a bulletproof vest, through a side door of the courthouse before the hearing. Many of the spectators who filled the courthouse were of high school age.

Carneal opened fire in the high school lobby as the prayer meeting was breaking up. Witnesses

said he reached into a backpack, drew a pistol and fired rapidly for about five seconds into the crowd of about 35 students.

Jessica James, 17, Kayce Steger, 15, and Nicole Hadley, 14, all members of the prayer group, were killed. Melissa Jenkins, 15 at the time, was left paralyzed from the chest down. The prayer group's leader, Ben Strong, a pastor's son who was then 17, was credited with preventing more bloodshed by persuading Carneal to stop firing.

"The plea bargain announced today is a major step toward resolving one of the most painful chapters in this tragedy we've been forced to live," the slain girls' families said in a statement that referred to Carneal as "the murderer who killed our daughters."

"It is our hope that today's announcement sends a clear message that this outrageous violence will not be tolerated."

Carneal was charged as an adult with three counts of murder and five counts of attempted murder, plus burglary, for stealing the pistol used in the shootings and four other guns from a home.

It was the second in a series of school shootings over several months. Two students were killed in Pearl, Miss., and four students and a teacher died in an ambush in Jonesboro, Ark. A teacher was killed at a school dance in Edinboro, Pa., and two students were shot to death in Springfield.

Veteran's son searches for answers

An Oregon man hopes that DNA tests will identify his father's remains

The Associated Press

SALEM — An Albany man will travel to Hawaii on Tuesday to examine what could be the remains of his father, a Vietnam War pilot once thought to be buried in the Tomb of the Unknowns.

David Amesbury said the trip could answer nagging questions about the fate of Air Force Maj. Harry Amesbury, whose plane was shot down over Vietnam in 1972.

"This will be one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life," Amesbury said. "I'm going to have scientists pick up a bone and say this is probably your father, and this mark or this mark suggests that he met a violent death."

Amesbury, 40, knows there's little doubt that his father and five crewmen died April 22, 1972, when their C-130 Hercules crashed near An Loc.

But like many families of Americans missing in action from the war, it's difficult to let go of even the slimmest hope without a positive identification, partly because of the widespread belief that some American prisoners of war were left behind in Vietnam.

"Nowadays, they use the word 'closure,'" said Amesbury, an assistant state attorney general.

Earlier this year, the Defense Department invited Amesbury to the Central Identification laboratory in Hawaii for a complete review of the forensic evidence that the laboratory has compiled on the remains.

The invitation was a breakthrough that the family has been

waiting for since 1992. That's when the military told them the remains were the right size to be their dad's but offered no other information.

At 6-foot-4, Harry Amesbury was taller than any other serviceman killed in the area.

Determined that the identification must be accurate, David Amesbury has insisted that independent experts review the records. That may now finally come to pass.

Laboratory officials say that teeth recovered from the crash site have been positively identified as those of Harry Amesbury. A report on the teeth has been sent to a forensic odontologist in Milwaukie, Ore., for an independent review.

"We have never experienced the openness that they seem to be exhibiting now, so we are hopeful," Amesbury said.

Commuter boats face space shortage

A Seattle ferry lowers passenger limits, saying that 18 inches per commuter is insufficient

The Associated Press

SEATTLE — Below-the-waist spread among Puget Sound commuters is presenting ferry officials with a dilemma.

The ferry Skagit, which carries passengers between Vashon Island and Seattle, can accommodate 250 people — in theory.

But this spring, after ferry workers noted some passengers were forced to sit in the aisles at peak times, officials trimmed that number to 240.

Last month, officials had another reality check and lowered

the number again, to 230. That made it almost certain that people would be left behind on the suburban and rural island. The Skagit takes 115 from Vashon plus 115 transfers from nearby Southworth.

This week, a pair of passengers got themselves arrested by slipping aboard the Skagit in defiance of the limits — and refusing to leave.

The overcrowding dilemma turns on the Coast Guard's standard allotment of 18 inches of seat-width per person. Simply put, the 18-inch butt rule hasn't kept pace with the times — or commuters' girths.

"Eighteen-inch butts are a thing of the past," ferry spokeswoman Susan Harris said. "We have all expanded."

So when Vashon residents Lori Gustavson and Brian Ewing committed their act of civil disobedience on Wednesday's 7 a.m. Vashon Island to Seattle run, boat riders clapped and cheered their support.

"I'm tired of seeing my neighbors left behind at the dock," said Gustavson, a criminal-defense lawyer. "... I wanted to create a little fuss to bring attention to the problem."

Ferry officials do not deny that limiting passenger numbers and overcrowding are problems. Harris said the system does not have the capacity to meet the demand.

Relief is in sight, however. Next September, a larger vessel, the Tyee — capacity 275 — will arrive to serve the Vashon run.

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